

The Sun.

BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1918.

BOOK "REVIEWING"

ON the subject of Book "Reviewing" we feel we can speak freely, knowing all about the business, as we do, though by no means a practitioner, and having no convictions on the score of it. For we point with pride to the fact that though many times indicted a conviction has never been secured against us. However, it isn't considered good form (whatever that is) to talk about your own crimes. For instance, after exhausting the weather you should say pleasantly to your neighbor: "What an interesting burglary you committed last night! We were all quite stirred up!" It is almost improper (much worse than merely immoral) to exhibit your natural egoism by remarking: "If I do say it, that murder I did on Tuesday was a particularly good job!"

For this reason, if for no other, we would refrain, ordinarily, from talking about book "reviewing"; but since ROBERT CORTIS HOLLIDAY has mentioned the subject in his *Walking-Stick Papers* and thus introduced the indelicate topic once and for all, there really seems no course open but to pick up the theme and treat it in a serious, thoughtful way.

How to Review a Book.

Book reviewing is so called because the books are not reviewed, or viewed (some say not even read). They are described with more or less accuracy and at a variable length. They are praised, condemned, weighed and solved by the use of logarithms. They are read, digested, quoted and tested for butter fat. They are examined, evaluated, enjoyed and assessed; criticised, and frequently found fault with (not the same thing, of course); chronicled and even orchestrated by the few who never write words without writing both words and music. JAMES HUNNEKER could make IRVIN COBB sound like a performance by the Boston Symphony. Others, like BENJAMIN DE CASSERES, have a dramatic gift. Mr. DE CASSERES writes book reviews.

Any one can review a book and every one should be encouraged to do it. It is unskilled labor. Good book reviewers earn from \$150 to \$230 a week, working only in their spare time, like the good looking young men and women who sell the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Country Gentleman*, but who seldom earn over \$100 a week. Book reviewing is one of the very few subjects not taught by the correspondence schools, simply because there is nothing to teach. It is so simple a child can operate it with perfect safety. Write for circular giving full particulars and our handy phrasebook listing 2,567 standard phrases indispensable to any reviewer—FREE.

In reviewing a book there is no method to be followed. Like one of the player pianos, you shut the doors (i. e., close the covers) and play (or write) *by instinct!* Although no directions are necessary we will suggest a few things to overcome the beginner's utterly irrational sense of helplessness.

One of the most useful comments in dealing with very scholarly volumes, such as *A History of the Statistical Process in Modern Philanthropical Enterprises*, by JACOB JONES, is as follows: "Mr. JONES's work shows signs of haste." The peculiar advantage of this is that you do not libel Mr. JONES; the haste may have been the printer's or the publisher's or almost anybody's but the post office's. In the case of a piece of light fiction the best way to start your review is by saying: "A new book from the pen of ALICE APOSTROPHE is always welcome." But suppose the book is a first book? One of the finest opening sentences for the review of a first book runs: "For a first novel GEORGE LAMPLIT'S *Good Gracious!* is a tale of distinct promise." Be careful to say "distinct"; it is an adjective that fits perfectly over the shoulders of any average chested noun. It gives the noun that upright, swagger carriage a careful writer likes his nouns to have.

The Anatomy of a Book Review.

But clothes do not make the man, and words do not make the book review. A book review must have a Structure, a Skeleton, if it be no more than the skeleton in the book closet. It must have a backbone and a bite. It must be able to stand erect and look the author in the face and tell him to go to the Home for Indigent Authors which the Authors League will build one of these days after it has met running expenses.

Our favorite book reviewer reviews the ordinary book in four lines and a semicolon. Unusual books drain his vital energy to the extent of a paragraph and a half, three adjectives to the square inch.

He makes it a point to have one commendatory

phrase and one derogatory phrase, which gives a nicely balanced "on the one hand . . . on the other hand" effect. He says that the book is attractively bound but badly printed; well written, but deficient in emotional intensity; full of action, but weak in characterization; has a good plot, but is devoid of style.

He reads all the books he reviews. Every little while he pounces upon a misquotation on page 438, or a misprint on page 279. Reviewers who do not read the books they review may chance upon such details while idly turning the uncut leaves or while looking at the back cover, but they never bring in three runs on the other side's error. They spot the fact that the heroine's mother, who was killed in a train accident in the fourth chapter, buys a refrigerator in the twenty-third chapter, and they indulge in an unpardonable witticism as to the heroine's mother's whereabouts after her demise. But the wrong accent on the Greek word in Chapter XVII gets by them; and as for the psychological impulse which led the hero to jump from the Brooklyn Bridge on the Fourth of July, they miss it entirely and betray their neglect of their duty by alluding to him as a poor devil crazed with the heat. The fact is, of course, that he did a Steve Brodie because he found something obscurely hateful in the Manhattan skyline. Day after day, while walking to his work on the Brooklyn Rapid Transit, he gazed at the sawtoothed outline of the buildings limned against the sky. Day by day his soul kept asking: "Why don't they get a gold filling for that cavity between the Singer and Woolworth towers?" And he would ask himself despondently: "Is this what I live for?" And gradually he felt that it was not. He felt that it might be something to die about, however. And so, with the rashness of youth, he leaped. The George Meredith-Thomas Hardy irony came into the story when he was pulled out of the river by his rival in DORINDA'S affections, GREGORY ANTHRACYTE, owner of the magnificent steam yacht Chuggermugger.

So much for the anatomy of a book review. Put backbone into it. Read before you write. Look before you leap. Be just, be fair, be impartial; and when you damn damn with faint praise, and when you praise praise with faint damns. Be all things to all books. Remember the author. Review as you would be reviewed by. If a book is nothing in your life it may be the fault of your life. And it is always less expensive to revise your life than to revise the book. Your life is not printed from plates that cost a fortune to make and another fortune to throw away. "Life is too short to read inferior books," eh? Books are too good to be guillotined by inferior lives—or inferior lives. BACON said some books were to be digested, but he neglected to mention a cure for dyspepsia.

Books as Accretions.

But when we say so much we have only touched the surface of a profound matter. The truth of that matter, the full depth of it, may as well be plumbed at once.

It is impossible to deal with a book as you would factor a number or a play. You can't be sure of the factors that make up the collective impact of the book upon you. There's no way of getting at them. They are summed up in the book itself, and no book can be split into multipliable parts. A book is not the author times an idea times the views of the publisher. A book is unfactorable, often undecipherable. It is a growth. It is a series of accretions about a central thought. The central thought is like the grain of sand which the oyster has pearled over. The central thought may even be a diseased thought and the pearl may be a very lovely and brilliant pearl, superficially at least, for all that. There is nothing to do with a book but to take it as it is or go at it hammer and tongs, scalpel and curette, chisel and auger—smashing it to pieces, scraping and cutting, boring and cleaving through the layers of words and subsidiary ideas and getting down eventually to the heart of it, to the grain of sand, the irritant thought that was the earliest foundation.

Such surgery may be highly skilful or highly and wickedly destructive; it may uncover something worth while and it may not; naturally you don't go in for much of it, if you are wise, and as a general thing you take a book as it is and not as it once was or as the author may, in the innocence of his heart or the subtlety of his experience, have intended it to be.

Surgery on a book is like surgery on a human being, for a book is alive; ordinarily the only justification for it is the chance of saving life. If the operator can save the author's life (as an author) by cutting he ought to go ahead, of course. The fate of one book is nothing as against the lives of books yet unwritten; the feelings of the author are not necessarily of more account than the screams of the sick child's parent. There have been such literary operations for which, in lieu of the \$1,000 fee of medical practice, the surgeon has been rewarded and more than repaid by a private letter of acknowledgment and heartfelt thanks. No matter how hard up the recipient of such a letter may

be the missive seldom turns up in those auction rooms where the A. L. S. (or Autograph Letter with Signature) sometimes brings an unexpected and astonishingly large price.

A MEMOIR OF JOYCE KILMER.

THERE is no doubt in the minds of the friends of JOYCE KILMER that ROBERT CORTIS HOLLIDAY, his intimate friend and literary executor, exquisite master of words and values, as he has shown himself so often (last of all in *Walking-Stick Papers*), is the person of all others to have written his memoir. It will be found in the memorial edition of the poems, essays and letters of JOYCE KILMER, which GEORGE H. DORAN is about to publish. The essays and most of the poems have been included in previous volumes, some out of print, but his few poems and prose selections from France will be found here, with many of his letters, and those who have not known his letters have not known the man. "JOYCE KILMER did not talk poetry," Mr. HOLLIDAY writes, "but he did talk exactly like his essays, which admirably present the brave, humorous wisdom of the man as his intimate friends knew him." And so it was with his letters.

It was the pleasantest war he had ever attended, KILMER wrote back from France. "Nice war, nice people, nice country, nice everything," and he says in a letter to the Reverend JAMES J. DALY, "When I next visit Campion I'll teach you (in addition to *The Boston Burglar*) an admirable song called *Down in the Heart of the Gas House District*." And to use Mr. HOLLIDAY'S words, "with that inimitable, irrepressible and incomparable Kilmerian pleasure" he contemplated his "senility."

"I picture myself at sixty, with a long white mustache, a pale gray tweed suit, a large panama hat, I can see my gnarled but beautifully groomed hands as they tremblingly pour out the glass of dry sherry which belongs to every old man's breakfast. I cannot think of myself at seventy or eighty—I grow hysterical with applause—I am lost in a delirium of massive ebony canes, golden snuff boxes and dainty silk hats."

No Perfunctory Writing, This.

"It is the felicity of these pages that they cannot be dull. It is their merit, peculiar in such a memoir, that they cannot be sad," Mr. HOLLIDAY modestly announces at the beginning of his excellent work, but we know that in unskilled hands the memoir of the most brilliantly starred life can be deprived of its rightful due. He gracefully acknowledges indebtedness to the many persons who have contributed to this appreciation, but those familiar with his literary quality will recognize the flavor throughout.

One of the best things about these pages is that they are frank. He does not dehumanize his friend as many another would have done. From the very earliest pages it is his policy to tell us not so much the things that are of good report as the things which will most interest us. In writing of the days when they were both clerks at SCRIBNER'S, he does not deny us the pleasure of knowing that KILMER was a very poor one.

"There followed a brief sojourn" (after the disastrous occasion with the editor of the *Horse Journal*, of which Mr. HOLLIDAY has told us), "at a salary of (I think) \$8 a week, as retail salesman in the book store of Charles Scribner's Sons, a dignity which the young litterateur wore with humorous dignity for exactly two weeks. As a retail salesman, however, this exceedingly interesting young man did not make a high mark. One's general impression of him 'on the floor' is a picture of a happy student, standing entranced, frequently with his back to the door (which theoretically he should have been watching for incoming customers), day after day engrossed in perusing a two volume edition of *Madame Bovary*."

The Intensive Life.

JOYCE KILMER would have been thirty-two in December, but at one score and ten, as LAURENCE GOMME has said, he was, in the amount that he had lived, about seventy years old. At twenty-five he was already a bit of a celebrity, having arrived in the pages of *Who's Who*, and it was shortly after this that he began lecturing, which in combination with many of his poems, most conspicuous among them *Trees*, and his interviews, made his name distinguished to an exceptional extent. Mr. HOLLIDAY has very wisely reprinted the earlier poems which KILMER has described as "worthless, all of them." He writes:

"No man can by decree or otherwise obliterate his past; both the good and the bad that he has done continue to pursue him. Ten times thrice happy is he, rarest of men, who, like KILMER, never penned a line, said a word or did a deed that can arise to bring confusion to those who love him."

All that a biographer can do is to give an impression of a personality, which Mr. HOLLIDAY has done admirably, making this somewhat unique in the way of a memoir by the fact that there exists a certain intellectual similarity between HOLLIDAY and JOYCE KILMER.